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SHORTGRASS COUNTRY by Monte Noelke

On a referral some 10 years ago, an oral surgeon arranged an appointment at an office where he claimed the best dentist in San Angelo presided. Being a herder doesn't qualify a layman to serve on the medical licensing boards, or to judge which bone cracker is stronger than the next dry socket expert, so I was forced to honor his decision.

All I remember about the visit was adherence to my routine of demanding the doctor keep both feet on the floor and off my chest, and leaving careful directions how to contact my next of kin in Mertzon.

A few weeks back, the same arrangements were made again. Two caps on my front teeth had disappeared. But when the bookkeeper started examining my chart, she was unable to find any evidence of capping done on other visits.

The office looked and smelled familiar. A few magazines on the waiting room table went as far back as those times. However, the pages were so tattered from patients clenching and unclenching their grip in their apprehension that the contents were blurred and didn't jog my memory.

Tracing the city map in the telephone directory, I found that I had probably left the original doctor's clinic and might possibly have strayed into the wrong dentist's office. San Angelo abounds in these masters of dreadful

drills, puncturing probes and merciless grinding stones. Short of hiring a private investigator, I had to let their records rule. Possibly I had left the oral surgeon's office in such a high pitch of emotional instability that I had wandered into the office of the ninth or tenth ranking dentist in town.

Nevertheless, the problem was to cap my two teeth, not start a 10-year-old dispute over the instigator of the first set of caps. I was prepared, as I had just watched a cowhand worm some saddle horses by pulling their tongues out far enough to squirt a past in their mouths. The way he disregarded the natural direction the horse's lips work was a big help to me to be ready to have my mouth pried open.

Whether he was the best in town ceased to be important. I commented on the missing information on my chart. He explained he thought the missing caps had been on my front teeth at birth.

"Monte," he said, "I don't want you to leave here dissatisfied, but I stand behind my work, and all we've ever done for you was perform a root canal."

After paying the bill up front, I took down the name of the nurse assisting him. I can't vouch for his dental work; but as a story teller, he's close to being a professional. Dentists tend to go that route. One doctor speaks all over

the country ad has entertained at conventions for years and years.

San Angelo and the surrounding outposts have fielded some mighty salty doctors and dentists before TV and air conditioning neutralized the scene. However, I think this guy is headed for the big time.

Mother never permitted baby pictures to be made of me. So no evidence exists whether I was born with two capped front teeth.